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CARRISTON'S GIFT.

The Story of an Occult and Mysterious Power.

The Danger to Which Its Possessor Was Subject, and How It Was Used to Discover the Lost-Evil Machinations Thwarted.

By Hugh Conway, Author of "Dark Days," "Caldwell," etc.

PART II.—CONCLUDED.

Carriston began to question me, but Brand stopped him. "You promised I should make inquiries first," he said. Then he turned to me:

"Look here, Richard,"—when he calls me Richard I know he is fearfully in earnest—"I believe you have brought us down on a fool's errand; but let us go to some place where we can talk together for a few minutes."

I led them across the road to the Railway Inn. We entered a room, and having for the sake of appearances, ordered a little light refreshment, told the waiter to shut the door from the outside. Brand settled down with the air of a cross-examining counsel. I expected to see him pull out a New Testament and put me on my oath.

"Now, Richard," he said, "before we go further I want to know your reasons for thinking this man, about whom you telegraphed, is Carriston's man, as you call him."

"Reasons? Why, of course he is the man," Carriston gave me his photograph. The likeness is indisputable—leaving the finger-joint out of the question."

Here Carriston looked at my cross-examiner triumphantly. The meaning of that look I have never to this hour understood. But I laughed, because I knew old Brand had for once made a mistake, and was going to be called to account for it. Carriston was about to speak, but the doctor waved him aside.

"Now, Richard, think very carefully. You speak of the missing finger-joint. We doctors know how many people persuade themselves into all sorts of things. Tell me, did you notice the likeness before you saw the mutilated finger, or did the fact of the finger's being mutilated bring the likeness to your mind?"

"Bless the man!" I said: "one would think I had no eyes. I tell you there is no doubt about this man being the original of the photo."

"Never mind—answer my question," he said. "Well, then, I am ashamed to confess it, but I put the photo in my pocket, and forgot all about it until I had recognized the man, and pulled out the likeness to make sure. I didn't even know there was a printed description at the foot, nor that any member was wanting. Confound it, Brand! I'm not such a dunder as you think."

Brand did not retaliate. He turned to his friend and said, gravely: "To me the matter is inexplicable. Take your own course, as I promised you should." Then he sat down, looking deliciously crest-fallen, and wearing the disconcerted expression always natural to him when worsted in argument.

It was now Carriston's turn. He plied me with many questions. In fact, I gave him the whole history of my adventure.

"What kind of house is it?" he asked.

"Better than a cottage—scarcely a farm-house. A place, I should think, with a few miserable acres of land belonging to it. One of those wretched little holdings which are simply curses to the country."

He made lots of other inquiries, the purport of which I could not then divine. He seemed greatly impressed when I told him that the man had never for a moment left me alone. He shot a second glance of triumph at Brand, who still kept silent, and looked as if all the wind had been taken out of his sails.

"How far is the place?" asked Carriston. "Could you drive me there after dark?"

At this question the doctor returned to life. "What do you mean to do?" he asked his friend. "Let us have no nonsense. Even now I feel sure that Carriston is misled by some chance resemblance."

"Hence a bit, old chap," I said.

"Well, whether or not we needn't do foolish things. We must go and swear information, and get a search-warrant, and the assistance of the police. The truth is, Richard," he continued, turning to me, "we have reason to believe, or I should say Carriston persists in fancying, that a friend of his has for some time been kept in hiding by the man whom you say you recognized."

us from sight, although on such a night we had the fear of our presence being discovered.

"What do you mean to do now?" asked Brand, in a discontented whisper. "You can't break into the house."

Carriston said nothing for a minute; then I felt him place his hand on my shoulder.

"Are there any horses, any cows, about the place?" he asked.

I told him I thought that my surly friend rejoiced in the possession of a horse and a cow.

"Very well. Then we must wait. He'll come out to see to them before he goes to bed," said Carriston, as decidedly as a General giving orders just before a battle.

I could not see how Brand expressed his feelings upon hearing this order from our commander—I know I shrugged my shoulders, and if I said nothing, I thought a deal. The present situation was all very well for a strongly interested party like Carriston, but he could scarcely expect others to relish the prospect of waiting, it might be for hours, under that comfortable hedge. We were all wet to the skin, and although I was extremely anxious to see the end of the expedition, and find out the meaning of the whole, I was, as a doctor, he must have felt sure that, provided he could survive the exposure, he would secure two fresh patients. However, we made no protest, but waited for events to develop themselves.

More than half an hour went by. I was growing numb and tired, and beginning to think that we were making asses of ourselves, when I heard the rattle of a chain, and felt Carriston give my arm a warning touch. No doubt my late host had made sure that his new door-fastenings were equal to a stronger test than that to which I had subjected the former ones; so we were wise in not attempting to carry his castle by force.

The door opened, and closed again. I saw the feeble glimmer of a lantern moving toward the out-house in which my horse had been stabled. I heard a slight rustling in the hedge, and, stretching out my arm, found that Carriston had left my side. In the absence of any command from him, I did not follow, but resumed the old occupation—waiting.

In a few minutes the light of the lantern reappeared; the bearer stood on the threshold of the house, while I wondered what Carriston was doing. Just as the door was opened for the second time, a dark figure sprang upon me! I heard a fierce oath and cry of surprise; then the lantern flew out of the man's hand, and he and his assailant tumbled struggling through the narrow doorway!

"Hurrah! the door is won, anyway!" I shouted, as, followed closely by the doctor, I jumped over the hedge and rushed to the scene of the fray.

Although Carriston's well-considered attack was so vigorous and unexpected that the man went down under it, although our leader utilized the advantage he had gained in a proper and laudable manner, by bumping that thick bullet head as violently as he could against the flag on which I lay, I doubt if, after all, he could have done his work alone. The countryman was a muscular brute and Carriston but a stripling. However, our arrival speedily settled the question.

"Bind him!" panted Carriston. "There is cord in my pocket." He appeared to have come quite prepared for contingencies. While Carriston still embraced his prostrate foe, and Brand, to facilitate matters, knelt on his shoulders, sat on his head, or did something else useful, I drew out from the first pocket I tried a nice length of half-inch lace, and had the immense satisfaction of tugging up my scowling friend in a most workmanlike manner. He must have felt those turns on his wrists for days afterward. Yet when we were at last at liberty to rise and leave him lying helpless on the kitchen floor, I consider I exercised great self-denial in not bestowing a few kicks upon him, as he swore at us in his broadest vernacular in a way which, under the circumstances, was no doubt a great comfort to him.

For some moments, while recovering his breath, Carriston stood and positively glared at his prostrate foe. At last he found words.

"Where is she? Where is the key, you bound?" he thundered out, stooping over the fellow, and shaking him with a violence which did my heart good. As he received no answer save the unrecording expressions above-mentioned, we unbent the wretch's pockets, and searched those greasy receptacles. Among the usual litter we did certainly find a key. Carriston snatched at it, and shouting "Madeline! Madeline! I come!" rushed out of the room like a maniac, leaving Brand and me to keep guard over our prisoners.

I filled a pipe, lit it, and then came back to my fallen foe.

"I say, old chap," I said, stirring him gently with the toe of my boot, "this will be a lesson to you. Remember, I told you that civility costs nothing. If you had given me Christian bed accommodation instead of making me wear out my poor bones on that infernal chair, you could have joggled along in your rascality quite comfortably, so far as I am concerned."

He was very ungrateful—so much so that my desire to kick him was intensified. I should not like to swear I did not to a slight degree yield to the temptation.

"Push a handkerchief in his mouth," cried Brand, suddenly. "A lady is coming."

With a right good will I did as the doctor suggested.

Just then Carriston returned. I don't want to raise home tempests, yet I must say he was accompanied by the most beautiful creature my eyes had ever lighted upon. True, she was pale as a lily—looked thin and delicate, and her face bore traces of anxiety and suffering, but for all that she was beautiful—too beautiful for words. I thought, as I looked at her. She was clinging in a half-frightened, half-confiding way to Carriston, and he—happy fellow!—regardless of our presence, was showering down kisses on her sweet pale face. Confound it! I grow quite romantic as I recall the sight of those lovers.

A most curious young man, that Carriston! He came to us, the lovely girl on his arm, without showing a trace of his recent excitement.

"Let us go now," he said, as calmly as if he had been taking a quiet evening drive. Then he turned to me.

"Do you think, Mr. Fenton, you could without much trouble get the dog-cart up to the house?"

I said I would try to do so.

"But what about these people?" asked Brand.

"I am afraid I must," said Brand, humbly. "But we must do something about this man," he continued.

Hereupon Carriston turned to our prisoner. "Listen, you villain," he said. "I will let you go—free if you breathe no word of this to your employer for the next fortnight. If he learns from you what has happened before that time, I swear you shall go to penal servitude. Which do you choose?"

I pulled out the gag, and it is needless to say which the fellow chose.

Then I went off, and recovered the horse and cart. I delighted the ladies, and with some difficulty got the dog-cart up to the house. Carriston must have exactly anticipated the events of the night. The parcel he had brought with him contained a bonnet and a thick, warm cloth cloak; his beautiful friend was equipped with these. Then leaving the woman of the house to untie her husband at her leisure and pleasure, away we started; the doctor sitting by me, Carriston and the lady behind.

We just managed to catch the last train from C—. Not feeling sure as to what form inquiries might take tomorrow, I thought it better to go up town with my friends, so, as we passed through Midcombe, I stopped, paid my bill and gave instructions for my luggage to be forwarded to me. By six o'clock the next morning we were all in London.

DR. BRAND IN CONCLUSION.

When I asked Dick Fenton to relate his experiences I did not mean him to do so at such length. But there, as he has written it, and as the writing is not a labor of love with him, let it go.

When Madeline Rowan found the bed, by the side of which she had thrown herself in an ecstasy of grief, unattended, she knew in a moment that she was the victim of a deep-laid plot. Being ignorant of Carriston's true position in the world, she could conceive no reason for the elaborate scheme which had been devised to lure her so many miles from her home, and make a prisoner of her.

A prisoner she was. Not only was the door locked upon her, but a slip of paper lay on the bed! It bore these words: "No harm is meant you, and in due time you will be released. Ask no questions, make no foolish attempts at escape, and you will be well treated."

Upon reading this the girl's first thought was one of thankfulness. She saw at once that the reported accident to her lover was but an invention. The probabilities were that Carriston was alive, and in his usual health. Now that she felt certain of this, she could bear anything.

From the day on which she entered that room to that on which we rescued her, Madeline was, to all intents and purposes, as close a prisoner in that lonely house on the hill-side as she might have been in the deepest dungeon in the world. Threats, entreaties, promises of bribes, availed nothing. She was not unkindly treated—that is, suffered no absolute ill usage. Books, materials for needle work and other little aids to while away time were supplied. But the only living creature she saw was the woman of the house, who attended to her wants, and, on one or two occasions, the man whom Carriston asserted he had seen in his garret. She had suffered from the close confinement, but had always felt certain that sooner or later her lover would find her, and effect her deliverance. Now that she knew he was alive, she could not be unhappy.

Carriston and Madeline were married at the earliest possible moment, and left England immediately after the ceremony. A week after their departure, by Carriston's request, I forwarded the envelope found upon our prisoner to Mr. Ralph Carriston. With it I sent a few lines stating where and under what peculiar circumstances we had become possessed of the document, and in reply to my communication, so wild and improbable as it seems, I am bound to believe that Charles Carriston's surmise was right—that Madeline was deceived away and concealed, not from any ill will toward herself, but with a view to the possible beneficial effect which her mysterious disappearance might work upon her lover's strange and excitable organization; and I firmly believe that had he not in some inexplicable way been firmly convinced that she was alive and faithful to him, the plot would have been a thorough success, and Charles Carriston would have spent the rest of his days in an asylum for the insane.

Both Sir Charles and I succeeded to his title shortly after his marriage—and Lady Carriston are now dead, or I should not have ventured to relate these things concerning them. They had twelve years of happiness. If measured by time, the period was but a short one; but I feel sure that in it they enjoyed more true happiness than many others find in the course of a protracted life. In world, thought and deed they were as one. She died in Rome of fever; and her husband, without, so far as I know, any particular complaint, simply followed her.

I was always honored with their sincerest friendship, and Sir Charles left me sole trustee to guarantee to his three sons; so there are now plenty of lives between Ralph Carriston and his desire. I am pleased to say that the boys, who are as dear to me as my own children, as yet show no evidence of possessing any gifts beyond Nature.

I know that my having made this story public will cause two sets of objectors to fall equally foul of me—the matter-of-fact prosaic man who will say that the abduction and subsequent imprisonment of Madeline Rowan was an absurd impossibility, and the scientific man, like myself, who can not dare not believe that Charles Carriston, from either memory or imagination, could draw a face and describe peculiarities by which a certain man could be identified. I am far from saying there may not be a simple, natural explanation of the puzzle, but I for one, have failed to find it, so close this tale as I began it, by saying I am a narrator, and nothing more.

[THE END.]

—It matters not how selfish a man may be, there is something in him which tells him the selfishness he sees in others is contemptible.—Exchange.

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